

# Exodus 21:2-11

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/exod/exod-21/exodus-212-11/>

*The first section of the Book of the Covenant concerns how male and female servants (or slaves) were to be treated.*

The first part of this section deals with the rules regarding male servants. The situation was that *If you buy a Hebrew slave*. The word *buy* (Heb. “tiqneh”), used here in a judicial sense, probably means “acquire.” One Israelite could not be the possession of another, but someone could “sell” themselves into servanthood due to poverty or indebtedness ([Leviticus 25:39](#); [Deuteronomy 15:12](#); [1 Kings 4:1](#)). This would preclude blatant slavery and make it closer to indentured servitude. This is why the word “servant” is used here instead of the word “slave.”

There are several rules for this servitude:

- First, *he shall serve for six years*. A servant was to be given the hope of freedom. This limited the term of an indentured contract to six years.
- Second, *on the seventh he shall go out as a free man without payment*. After the six-year servitude, he was to be set free with nothing owed or any strings attached.
- Third, the servant was to leave with what he entered with. The law specified that *If he comes alone, he shall go out alone; if he is the husband of a wife, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife, and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall belong to her master, and he shall go out alone*. In other words, if a man was married when he entered into servanthood, when he left, she would leave also. But if the master gave him a wife, she would remain with the master along with any offspring. Whatever the master gave to the servant remains the property of the master.
- Fourth, the male servant could choose to remain a servant. There was a process to make this happen. First, *if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man*. The servant first must proclaim *plainly* that he wants to remain with his master, wife, and children. This determination could not be made by the *master*. It must be a freely made decision by the *servant*. If this happened, then certain legal procedures must take place. The process required that *his master shall bring him to God*, meaning the master was

to present the servant before the judges. Next, *he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost*. Here, at the master's door, *his master shall pierce his ear with an awl*. This would be a clearly visible sign of the servant's devotion to his master. No one else could be his master. Once this was done, the servant would *serve him permanently*.

Verses 7 – 11 deal with the rules concerning a female servant. Here, the situation was that *if a man sells his daughter as a female slave, she is not to go free as the male slaves do*. This would happen if a father determined that to “sell” his daughter would provide a better life for her. Remember that marriages were arranged by the parents at this time. The word translated “female slave” can also be rendered “maidservant,” implying that she was not “sold” as a slave in the ordinary sense. Here, it involved possible marriage. There are three circumstances mentioned:

The first one dealt with the scenario where she was “sold” to become the master's wife or concubine. This shows that she was not “sold” to become a slave; instead, she was to become someone's spouse or concubine. (The Genesis story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar illustrate these relationships). However, what should happen if things do not go as planned and *she is displeasing in the eyes of her master who designated her for himself?* The master was to *let her be redeemed*, presumably by a kinsman ([Leviticus 25:47-54](#)). He was not free to treat her unfairly or cruelly. And most certainly *He does not have authority to sell her to a foreign people because of his unfairness to her*. She was never supposed to be treated as property or less than a fellow Israelite.

The second circumstance was *if he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters* (v. 9). She was not to be treated as a servant if she married into the family.

Verse 10 describes the third circumstance—*if he takes to himself another woman, he may not reduce her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights*. If the man married someone else, he was still required to provide for the female servant's three essentials—“*food,*” “*clothing,*” and “*conjugal rights.*” The “*conjugal rights*” mentioned here would likely provide security for the woman by giving her offspring that can care for her. This basic orientation toward financial security for women is clearly illustrated in the story of Ruth. We saw in [Genesis 38](#) an episode where God punished Judah's son for refusing to impregnate Tamar and allow her to have offspring – presumably because he did not want any of his prosperity to be divided to Tamar's offspring. Thus, this

principle was already recognized, and is now being legislated for specific application.

Verse 11 described what was to be done *if he will not do these three things for her*. There might be an unwillingness or inability to provide “these three things” for the female servant. If so, *then she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money*. In other words, she must be treated as a daughter and a free woman and released without the requirement of being redeemed.

Clearly, female servants had different treatment from male servants; there was no stipulation for a release after six years, for example. But they still had the right to be treated well and not be coerced or treated as property.

### **Biblical Text:**

**<sup>2</sup>“If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years; but on the seventh he shall go out as a free man without payment. <sup>3</sup>If he comes alone, he shall go out alone; if he is the husband of a wife, then his wife shall go out with him. <sup>4</sup>If his master gives him a wife, and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall belong to her master, and he shall go out alone. <sup>5</sup>But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man,’ <sup>6</sup>then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently.**

**<sup>7</sup>“If a man sells his daughter as a female slave, she is not to go free as the male slaves do. <sup>8</sup>If she is displeasing in the eyes of her master who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He does not have authority to sell her to a foreign people because of his unfairness to her. <sup>9</sup>If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters. <sup>10</sup>If he takes to himself another woman, he may not reduce her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights. <sup>11</sup>If he will not do these three *things* for her, then she shall go out for nothing, without *payment of money*.**